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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 000813

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/31/2019  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [ASEC](#) [TH](#)  
SUBJECT: RED RALLIES CONTINUE, CALL FOR PROVINCIAL  
SUPPORTERS TO JOIN MAIN PROTEST IN BANGKOK

REF: A. BANGKOK 790 (THAKSIN LASHES OUT)  
[1](#)B. 08 BANGKOK 3280 (THAKSIN PHONE-IN)

BANGKOK 00000813 001.2 OF 003

Classified By: POL Counselor George Kent, reason: 1.4 (b, d).

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

[1](#)1. (C) Anti-government "redshirt" demonstrators continued to protest at the Government House compound March 31, seemingly settling in for long stay. While numbers shrink during the day, they increase during evening rallies built around former PM Thaksin's phone-ins, and the core protestors vow to stay until PM Abhisit resigns. The protestors appear to have caused only minimal damage, and they are cooperating with the authorities at the site. Smaller redshirt protests took place in many provincial capitals March 30 but were called off March 31 by red leaders in Bangkok in favor of concentrating supporters at Government House. Thaksin nightly speeches continue to make blunt, damaging revelations about his political foes. Thaksin's and other redshirts' statements increasingly appear to target the royal family, albeit indirectly. An official from the Office of the Prime Minister appears to have asked that a television station limit its coverage of the protests.

[1](#)2. (C) Comment: The mobilization of redshirts outside of Bangkok gives protest leaders hope they can sustain their protest for the long haul; United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) co-leader Vira Musikapong told us March 31 they were now calling all provincial supporters to come to Bangkok to force the Abhisit government to step down. At the moment, apart from rhetoric, the redshirts generally appear to exercise self-control, and their leaders recognize that acting violently would stigmatize their movement. While we do not see that surrounding Government House will achieve their goal of ending Abhisit's administration, Thaksin's revelations have succeeded in once again focusing public attention on the perceived conflict between Thaksin and top Palace figures, without an easy resolution in sight. End Summary and Comment.

BANGKOK PROTEST CONTINUES

[1](#)3. (SBU) At mid-day on March 31, a senior police official estimated to us that approximately 2,600 "redshirt"

anti-government protestors remained at the Government House compound; when we visited mid-afternoon after a fierce thunderstorm, there were less than 2,000. UDD leader Vira Musikapong told us that the relaxed atmosphere and lower numbers were the result of a government decision to cancel the weekly Cabinet meeting. The number had swelled from 6,000 at mid-day March 30 to 16,000 at the time of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's phone-in to the rally on the evening of the 30th, according to police estimates. We expect the redshirt crowd to increase again on the evening of March 31. There was very minimal security force presence when we visited mid-afternoon, no more than 50 police relaxing out of sight of the main stage, and roughly 300 soldiers inside the Government House compound.

14. (SBU) Our police contact told us that, on the first day of this latest round of protests, the redshirts had dumped some containers into a nearby canal, and they subsequently spray-painted graffiti on the compound's walls. Otherwise, the redshirts had caused no damage; by time we visited, the walls had been whitewashed again. Redshirts are allowing the security forces and other government staff members access to the compound; the soldiers were able to conduct a mid-afternoon troop rotation through a back gate without any difficulty.

15. (SBU) Redshirts also held demonstrations outside of Bangkok on March 30. According to press reports, redshirts in 42 of Thailand's 76 provinces -- in all regions except for the South (which is generally supportive of the Democrat Party) -- gathered at provincial halls, echoing Thaksin's public call for a new legislative election. The Interior Ministry estimated publicly that a total of 8,500 redshirts took part in these provincial demonstrations. Having flexed

BANGKOK 00000813 002.2 OF 003

provincial muscles, UDD leaders called on supporters March 31 to join the main protest in Bangkok, UDD leader Vira told us March 31.

THAKSIN - DISHING DIRT, AIMING HIGH?  
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16. (SBU) Addressing the crowd by video link from abroad, Thaksin on March 30 continued to attack Privy Council President Prem Tinsulanonda, claiming that Prem, as Privy Council President, had frequently sought to influence the promotions of military officers. (Note: We have reported that for years. End note.) He also denounced the Constitutional Court for having made politicized rulings that brought down two pro-Thaksin administrations in 2008, and he smeared Foreign Minister Kasit Piromya by saying Kasit had accepted gifts of money that he (Thaksin) had provided when Thaksin was Prime Minister and Kasit his adviser.

17. (SBU) There have been no efforts by the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) to confront the redshirts physically. PAD figures have, however, called for stricter use of the lese majeste provision of the criminal code against those who cause offense to the monarchy -- in this context, a clear reference to Thaksin and redshirt leaders. Bangkok's Police Chief stated publicly that Thaksin's March 30 remarks did not insult the monarchy.

18. (C) Redshirt calls for the resignation of Privy Councilors appear to some Thais to infringe on the prerogative of the monarch, however, as the Constitution specifies that "the selection, appointment or removal of Privy Councilors shall be at the King's pleasure." (Note: Along similar lines, ref B reported a November phone-in when Thaksin seemed indirectly to dispute the monarchy's supremacy.) UDD leader Vira disagreed with this interpretation, claiming that Privy Councilors could themselves decide to resign. When asked to name any Privy Councilor who had resigned, apart from GEN Surayud, who left the Privy Council in 2006 to become interim PM and returned in 2008, Vira smiled, and acknowledged that

Privy Councilors all served until they died.

WHAT NEXT? RED LEADER VIRA AND PROTESTORS WEIGH IN

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¶9. (C) Vira acknowledged that red leaders did not have a master plan and were making tactical decisions on a day-to-day basis. In general, protestors would remain until they achieved their objectives: either PM Abhisit resigning or GEN Prem and GEN Surayud resigning. Vira expressed confidence that the reds had gained momentum, that numbers would continue to swell with new arrivals from the provinces until the crowd routinely reached 100,000. The protest would remain focused on Government House until Abhisit's return from the G-20 Summit in the UK. Were Abhisit to refuse to step down, as expected, the red leaders would deploy protesters to the houses of Cabinet members and other key figures, like GEN Prem, seeking to shut them in/down at home as well. Vira claimed the UDD could sustain the protest through the traditional Thai New Year Songkhran (April 13-15), when nearly everyone returns to home villages, but suggested he did not think the red protest would last two months.

¶10. (C) Vira vowed that the reds would stay peaceful, and noted the more extreme red rhetoric heard on community radio and Radio Taxi (ref A) was toned down on the main stage. When asked about the two incidents in which redshirts on the fringes of the Government House rally assaulted two separate passersby wearing yellow shirts, a Monday tradition to honor the King but a color appropriated by the PAD for its 2008 protests (ref A), Vira squirmed, and said that the attacks had not taken place near the main stage. Vira claimed that most Thai bureaucrats had stopped wearing yellow in 2008 due to the PAD protests; we pointed out a resurgence of Monday yellowshirt wearing in the past two months and suggested Vira consider making a special announcement on Monday calling on redshirts not to attack yellow shirts to show the UDD's commitment to peaceful dialogue. Vira grunted, and did not respond either positively/negatively.

BANGKOK 00000813 003.2 OF 003

¶11. (C) The atmosphere in the blockaded streets around Government House had the feel of a typical Thai fair, similar to that of the yellow PAD protests on the same streets from August-December 2008. A wide array of redshirts we engaged in the streets around Government House expressed enthusiasm for their cause and vowed to stay as long as it took to achieve their aims: democracy; Thaksin's return; and Abhisit's resignation. A group of five policemen co-manned one checkpoint with a black-clad, unarmed, self-proclaimed "King Taksin Warrior" who said he was there to "fight the PAD" openly sympathized with red cause. (The King Taksin Warrior group is associated with Major General Khattiya Sawasdipol, aka Sae Daeng, and has provided security for UDD in the past. King Taksin ruled in the 1700's, and his name is phonetically distinct from that of former Prime Minister Thaksin.) For their part, the police openly spoke disparagingly of both the government and the army. Five monks from various provinces said they had joined the protest for: democracy; to counter the Santi Asoke sect which had backed the PAD; and to get more monks' benefits in the next constitution. One stand selling Thaksin books and DVDs also offered a newspaper style publication of the "Network of Patriotic Thai" with anti-Muslim and anti Democrat slurs.

MEDIA: TOO MUCH RED COVERAGE?

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¶12. (SBU) The red protest has dominated local news coverage since it began. An Embassy contact at a television station told us on March 30 that his station manager received a call from the Office of the Prime Minister; the government official (unidentified to us) had requested that the station reduce its coverage of the redshirt protests and "balance" it

with reporting of other news. The station manager relayed instructions to that effect to his subordinates. A print media editor told us that he was free to cover the demonstrations as he saw fit. (Note: Thai governments traditionally have sought to influence broadcast media more than print media. End Note.)  
JOHN